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**WHITE SUPREMACY AS CLASS COMPROMISE: THE POVERTY OF
STRUCTURAL RACISM AS A THEORETICAL PARADIGM**

by

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THESIS

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Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

*In memory of Robert A. Mink,
a worker.*

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This thesis would not have been possible without the direction of Prof. Michael Goldfield. Anything of value in what follows is a consequence of his guidance. The errors are mine. Prof. Goldfield plucked me from the obscurity of theory, and planted me firmly in the reality of exploitation, oppression, and the dialectic. For that, I am eternally grateful. Matthew Lacouture, truly one of the most promising political scientists of his generation, provided incisive comments and criticism throughout my drafting of this piece. Prof. Paul V. Kershaw forced me to more closely interrogate the structure-agency relationship, and the meaningfulness of historical categories. Countless conversations with Jason Lawrence, Kevin G. Lorentz II, Prof. Ronald Brown, Prof. David Fassenfest, and Prof. Timothy Bledsoe have led me to present my ideas in a more cogent, nuanced, and refined manner. Finally, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my partner, Michelle Nakad, for her patience and invaluable emotional support. Without her, all of this would have significantly less meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I develop a theoretical frame through which the perpetuation of racial inequality in the United States can be fruitfully interpreted. This reconceptualization is necessary, I argue, because the now dominant paradigm of so-called “structural racism” is methodologically untenable. I contend that the seminal theoretical and empirical accounts within the paradigm do not provide compelling or methodologically sound explanations for the perpetuation of racial inequality, often (and disturbingly) ignoring the historical record of race relations in the US. Specifically, I show that these accounts rely on the dubious causal mechanisms of structural inertia (or, as Maynard & Wilson (1980) put it, they are guilty of structural reification), or ideological racism. Where these pitfalls are avoided or otherwise acknowledged, the paradigm is still insufficient in explaining the persistence of racial inequality because it either consciously or unconsciously avoids contextualizing the current regime of racial inequality within the larger historical role of race in American history. As such, it is unable to explain the various historical iterations of largescale social movements predicated on interracialism or the wholesale elimination of racial inequality, and these movements’ subsequent liquidation. In sum, the poverty of theories of structural racism consists in their profound lack of nuance, and their refusal to historicize race as a sociological category.

I attempt to remedy these issues by locating the causal impetus of racialized social structures in the class relations of the US. I argue that, broadly speaking,

workers pursue their interests collectively in one of two ways: through race and gender inclusive, class-based organizations, or through exclusionary race and gender-based organizations. To combat the possibility or reality of the former, employers and the state—separately and in conjunction—have historically incentivized and encouraged the latter to avoid potential shifts in the balance of class power. Building upon Piven & Cloward ([1971] 1993) and Goldfield (1989), I argue that organized, interracial, and class solidaristic social unrest leads not only to relief programs that assuage civil unrest through the implementation of social welfare policies and other economic and social concessions, but, crucially, to relief programs that are meant specifically to create or intensify racial antagonisms and quell class solidarity. I model this relationship using what Erik Olin Wright (2000) has described as a “positive class compromise.” While Wright’s conceptualization of a positive class compromise is essentially normative—a hypothetical “non-zero-sum game between workers and capitalists” wherein “both parties can improve their [material interests] through various forms of active, mutual cooperation”—I use the concept descriptively to explain the perpetuation of white supremacy in the US, given the empirical assumption of inherently antagonistic class relations between the working class and their employers, and the historic tendency of the state to restore and transform white supremacy after outbursts of interracial, class-based worker militancy. In other words, the possibility of continued social unrest is curtailed by elevating white workers socially, politically, psychologically, and economically relative to non-white workers (see Fredrickson 1981 p. 69). White supremacy, then,

in its various iterations and guises, is one of the primary processes through which the inherently antagonistic class relations of American capitalism are hegemonized.¹

In Section 1, I survey the foundational accounts within the paradigm of structural racism, pointing out their individual methodological shortcomings while critiquing the plausibility of the paradigm as a whole. In Section 2, I delineate the theoretical framework for a feasible theory of the perpetuation of racial inequality. In Section 3, I construct a model that conceptualizes white supremacy as a positive class compromise. In Section 4, I provide a cursory framework for interpreting the model historically. Section 5 concludes the piece, noting avenues for further research, emphasizing the importance of labor market segregation in buttressing the socio-political regime(s) of white supremacy.

¹ I use “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense, denoting class relations that are reproduced and sustained through the “*active consent* of people in the subordinate classes,” rather than through outright and constant coercion (Wright 2000 p. 964, emphasis in original).

SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

Structural racism, the now dominant paradigm within the study of the perpetuation of racial inequality, argues that various social institutions (e.g., the spatial organization of cities, housing markets, labor markets, public school systems, etc.) operate, *prima facie*, according to a racially neutral internal logic, but, in reality, produce racialized outcomes to the detriment of non-whites (see Powell 2008, Bonilla-Silva 1997, and Galster 1988 for a methodological overview). In combination, these institutions create a social structure that compounds racial disadvantage and perpetuates racial inequality. Crucially, structural racism rejects explicit racism as a principle driver of racial inequality—indeed, one of the primary theoretical implications of structural racism is that if we were somehow able to eliminate explicit racism—if we cast off all of the racists to an island in the Pacific—racial inequality would persist and continue to renew itself (Powell 2008 pp. 794-795).² Traditional models of racialized outcomes—models that rely on linear causation from the intentional actions of explicitly racist actors to racialized harm—not only misrepresent the causal factors involved in racialized outcomes, but they also ignore empirical trends that illustrate an ideological shift away from explicit racism to a “new” “colorblind” racism (Hunt 2004; Hunt 2007; Merolla, Hunt, & Serpe 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2014). Theories of structural racism shift the onus of causality

² Hence the title of one of the standard texts within this paradigm: *Racism without Racists*.

away from the individual and their intentions, to the cumulative effects of a racialized social structures.

Problematically, in eschewing the intent of actors in the social system, it becomes difficult to explain why racial inequality reproduces itself and evolves over time without recourse to a kind of methodologically untenable structural inertia. While occasionally paying lip-service to the historical origins of the social structures deemed particularly operative in the perpetuation of racial inequality, theories of structural racism rely substantially upon the *self-perpetuation* of social structure over time, rather than causal mechanisms grounded in the actions of actual individuals in society. Much like the deist's clockmaker, theories of structural racism assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that once the racial structure is in place, it just "goes." Indeed, while the emphasis upon certain structural drivers of racial inequality varies widely between different authors, the presentation of their arguments is fairly similar. In essence, the arguments are made in two stages: first, influenced by racial prejudice and explicit discrimination, various institutions have been established historically that operate, in tandem, to create racial inequality; second, the racialized structure, once created, operates according to an internal logic that agents passively implement over time, leading to the structure's self-perpetuation. Whereas in the first stage agents act purposefully and their actions create and transform structure, agents in the second stage are treated as "trägers [bearers] or vectors of ulterior structural determinations"—the social structure operates independently of agents' intentions and actions (Thompson 1978 pp. 148-149). The social structure is treated

“independently of the particular contexts in which [it is] produced,” and, as such, these “conceptual schemes and theories deal not with society but with reified abstractions” (Maynard & Wilson 1980, p. 306). Racialized social structure qua “reified abstraction” is treated as the ultimate cause of racial inequality, not the cumulative actions of individuals. As Maynard & Wilson put it, such theories “ignore the fact that the features of such social structures are produced in actual interaction between real people and cannot be analyzed as though they existed independently of the activities that produce them” (p. 308).

Wilson’s ([1987] 2012) seminal work within the paradigm has been widely critiqued for this methodological shortcoming, especially by Massey and Denton (1993), albeit in different terms. Wilson’s thesis is centered upon the colorblind operation of an increasingly deindustrializing economy: while a racial division of labor was established through historical instances of explicitly racist practice, the contemporary exacerbation of racial inequality and the expansion of inner-city anomy can be traced to economic trends completely unrelated to race or racism (pp. 11-12). Non-whites have simply been disproportionately negatively affected by automation, loss of market-share for American manufacturers, and the transformation of factory design/manufacturing techniques due to their occupational concentration in manufacturing (ibid. pp. 38-55). These trends have led to disproportionately high unemployment rates, concomitant surges in poverty levels, and the rise in related social diseases (e.g., crime, welfare dependence, out of wedlock births, drug abuse, etc.) (ibid. pp. 63-84). In essence, the historical artefact

of racial discrimination was subsequently affected by non-racial dynamics, resulting in the contemporary iteration of racial inequality. A social structure (economic adaption) operated according to its own internal logic, unaffected by human action or intention; racial inequality happened to be the accidental consequence. It follows from this argument that non-whites do not resist this state of affairs, and whites have no role in its perpetuation. The only operative cause is the internal logic of a social structure. All other social actors passively accept the established circumstances.

Massey & Denton (1993) demonstrate in detail that racial inequality cannot be considered a residue or artefact of the blind operation of social structural logic; rather, the operation of social structures must themselves have a cause in the actions and intentions of individual agents. In other words, they argue that theories like Wilson's that "objectif[y] social structures without recognizing that only human action instantiates, reproduces, and transforms these structures" are methodologically untenable (see Wendt 1987 p. 385 and Abrams 1982 pp. ix-17 for a fuller discussion). While I find Massey and Denton's purported cause of the continued existence of racialized social structures (i.e., "white antipathy") largely unconvincing, their contribution correctly diagnoses the unsoundness of arguments predicated on structural inertia (p. 213). It must be acknowledged that when faced with social structures, individuals act (alone or in concert with others) in ways that reinforce and perpetuate the social structures, or in ways that alter or eliminate the social structures. Recourse to passive acceptance of their operation not only makes it impossible to determine the initial impetus for their formation, but it also makes it

impossible to determine how and why they change over time. Theories that rely on structural inertia eliminate anti-structural agency (e.g., the possibility of non-white resistance), and the potentiality of active manipulation of the operation of social structures *a priori*.

While Massey & Denton's critique of Wilson has shifted the paradigm away from wholesale acceptance of his thesis (see Charles 2003), Sharkey's (2013) extremely influential and much more recent work—popularized by the journalism of Ta-Nehisi Coates (see especially Coates 2014)—is guilty of the same methodological flaws. Like Wilson, Sharkey acknowledges the historical basis of racial inequality in explicit racist practice, specifically emphasizing the long-term effects of New Deal housing policies on the de facto perpetuation of residential segregation by race (pp. 21, 58-62). However, the continuity and exacerbation of racial segregation over time, or, as his subtitle puts it, “the end of progress toward racial equality,” is predicated upon the passive operation of social structures. Sharkey argues that “place” is perhaps the single greatest determining factor for one's life chances: Place determines the quality of school one attends, it determines access to labor markets (which determines access to resources), it determines proximity to crime and violence, it determines the “quality” of one's peers, and it even determines one's parenting style (p. 116). Sharkey convincingly argues that the cumulative disadvantages of place compound intergenerationally: a child's “inheritance of the ghetto” leads to extreme levels of downward socio-economic mobility, as well as a near inability to translate socio-economic gains from one

generation to the next (pp. 96, 105). In other words, the racialized social structures of residential segregation were established historically, and have since been passively accepted by both whites and non-whites. While more careful in his analysis of the anti-structural movements than Wilson, Sharkey still largely discounts non-white agency, while largely exonerating white pro-structural agency. Intergenerational inheritance of spatial disadvantage certainly compounds racial inequality over time, as Sharkey's data exhaustively illustrate, but this is not a *cause* of "the end of progress toward racial inequality." It is simply how a racialized social structure operates: a racialized social structure that is "instantiate[d], reproduce[d], and transform[ed]" by human agency.

While some accounts within the paradigm are more attuned to—or, at least, aware of—the methodological issues associated with structural reification, the attempts to solve the problem are similarly insufficient, or, at best, incomplete. I focus on three such attempts. The first, utilized most effectively by Sugrue (2014), uses structuration theory as a means to account for the continuing existence and transformation of the social structures that are responsible for the persistence of racial inequality. Structuration theory gives "agents and structures equal ontological status," and sees "agents and structures as 'co-determined' or 'mutually constituted' entities" (Wendt 1987, p. 339). As Sugrue (2014) himself puts it, "social structures act as parameters that limit the range of individual and collective decisions. The consequences of hundreds of individual acts or of collective activity, however, gradually strengthen, redefine, or weaken economic and social structures. The

relationship between structure and agency is dialectical and history is the synthesis” (p. 11, 285 note 20). While structuration theory overcomes the reification (or, to put it more colorfully, fetishization) of social structure implicit in theories of structural racism—namely by giving structure a perpetual cause in the continuing actions of individual agents; themselves a function of existing social structure—it does so at the expense of the capacity to make generalizations about the operation of society, and is generally unable to account for the dynamism of social structures without recourse to the ill-defined vagaries of “historical contingency.” Because history is the dialectical “synthesis” of structure and agency, both are often conflated “mak[ing] it impossible to hold them apart, in the kind of semi-artificial tension that is needed to explicate the terms of their relations” (Katznelson 1993 p. 88). While largely correct in its insistence upon the co-determining nature of social structure and individual agency, in synthesizing the two in the analysis of history, theory—with its explanatory and predictive capacity and its generalizability—is sacrificed in the pursuit nuance and detail. While this is, perhaps, not an altogether useless approach—especially if one’s goal, like Sugrue’s, is to provide an historical case study—it is largely unsatisfactory in accounting for the secular persistence of racial inequality, the marked similarity of racial structures over time and place, and its evolution, which has tended to occur cataclysmically, rather than gradually as structuration theory implies.

Another attempt to overcome the objectification of racialized social structures is made in the “neo-Myrdalian” work of George Galster.³ Although Galster’s cumulative causation thesis concurs with structuration theory in its insistence upon the co-determination of structure and agency, unlike structuration theory Galster avoids conflating the two, while, critically, providing a theoretical explanation for the persistence of racialized social structures through the actions of individual agents. In other words, whereas structuration theory does not provide a generalizable rationale for agents’ actions in their role as perpetuators of social structure (i.e., it is not a theory at all; see Waltz 2010 pp. 1-17 for a useful discussion), Galster’s cumulative causation thesis does. Galster argues that racial inequality is self-reinforcing: racialized social structures produce racialized outcomes; racialized outcomes “legitimize stereotypical images”; stereotypical images intensify racial discrimination and prejudice; racial discrimination and prejudice produce and sustain racialized social structures, *ad infinitum* (Galster 1992, pp. 192, 201; Galster 1988, p. 402). While “white antipathy,” as Massey & Denton (1993, p. 213) put it, is ultimately responsible for the persistence of racial inequality, racism is not treated as a free-floating phenomenon, disconnected and exogenous from the operation of racialized social structures themselves⁴ (Galster 1988, pp. 395-396). Rather,

³ While the “neo-Myrdalian” cumulative causation thesis is present in much of Galster’s work (see, for instance, Galster & Godfrey 2005, p. 261), its theoretical foundations are most fully elaborated in Galster 1988 and Galster 1992.

⁴ This is how racism—defined as an ideology of racial superiority that may or may not manifest itself as overt discrimination and/or prejudice along racial lines—is often treated both academically and popularly. Massey & Denton (1993) are especially culpable in this regard (although they do report Galster’s claims in

Galster claims, racial prejudice is simply a rational reaction by whites to the genuine social pathologies of the black underclass; pathologies that are ultimately the result of racialized social structures. Racial prejudice is, in a sense, justified, because the “reality on which such stereotypes and opinions are based remains essentially correct” (Galster 1992, p. 203). Since the stereotypes of blacks that whites tend to hold are “essentially correct,” whites rationally act in ways that fortify and perpetuate racialized social structures (e.g., labor market discrimination against blacks is wholly explicable if blacks are, in reality, a “potent combination of criminal record, unstable job history, illegitimacy, low educational attainment, poor work habits, and chemical dependencies” (ibid. p. 201)). Racialized social structures are caused by whites’ prejudices; whites’ prejudices are confirmed and justified by the operation of racialized social structures: racial inequality is perpetuated because whites have a reason to perpetuate it.

Again, like structuration theory, Galster’s cumulative causation thesis avoids the reification of social structure by giving individual agents an impetus to perpetuate the social structures that cause racial inequality. Unlike structuration theory, however, this impetus (i.e., “attitudinal reinforcement” of racial prejudice through the operation of racialized social structures) is explicable theoretically, and

passing; p. 109). While, according to Charles (2003), Massey & Denton were largely responsible for reintroducing racial discrimination as an operative variable in the perpetuation of racial inequality (specifically as a rejoinder to Wilson ([1987] 2012)), they did so largely without grounding it in existing social relations. “White antipathy” may be the ultimate cause of racial inequality, but this leaves the origin of white antipathy entirely unexplained. The same is true for the now fashionable study of implicit bias (Quillian 2006).

generalizable over time and place. However, Galster's claims are not without their serious faults. Beyond the seemingly obvious apologism for the racism of whites, his "cumulative causation" thesis largely ignores the agency of blacks, is unable—because it conceptualizes the perpetuation of racial inequality as a closed system ("an ever-worsening self-reinforcing 'vicious cycle'" (ibid. p. 200))—to account for the transformation of racial inequality over time,⁵ and, most importantly, it cannot explain the varied and relatively widespread incidence of whites overcoming racial prejudice to pursue common goals with blacks and other non-whites (or, at the very least, is unable to explain why regimes of racial inequality are re-implemented when successfully challenged by interracial economic and social movements). In other words, if attitudinal reinforcement is the causal driver of the perpetuation of racial

⁵ Galster does allow for exogenous shocks to affect the otherwise endogenous linkages of the cumulative causation model (Galster 1992, p. 200). However, these exogenous shocks (e.g., "macroeconomic conditions, technologies, political ideologies, religious beliefs, laws, and public policies" (ibid.)) are left largely unexplored; specifically, the exogenous nature of these factors is left completely unchallenged. It is not altogether obvious that evolving political ideologies, religious beliefs, laws, and public policies should be treated as originating separately from the social structures that perpetuate racial inequality. Indeed, even the implementation of technologies has historically effected non-whites and whites unequally, often at the behest of racial animus. For instance, black coal miners were largely driven out of the industry by the discriminatory implementation of industrial mechanization, and were left unprotected by the largely white leadership of the United Mine Workers of America who did "not believe[] that it had a responsibility to fight the many racially discriminatory policies of the companies" (Goldfield 1993, pp. 9-10). In the auto industry, higher productivity in majority white plants was achieved largely through automation, while in majority black plants, like Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant in Detroit, higher productivity was achieved through so-called "Niggermation," or forcing black workers to "work harder and faster under increasingly unsafe and unhealthy conditions" (Georgakas & Surkin 2012, pp. 85-106).

inequality, the cumulative causation thesis is unable to explain why, in the absence discriminatory attitudes driving individual action, laws, public policies, and social practices are re-imposed that are meant to perpetuate racial inequality. While I will discuss this in more detail in Section 4, some cursory remarks are perhaps appropriate.

As Goldfield (1993) has argued persuasively, and dozens of case studies have confirmed (see, for example, Horowitz 1997), successful unionization of interracial workforces requires the organization of all workers, regardless of race, and must have “at least an initial [racially] equalitarian stance” (p. 23). As the following quote—by a white steelworker from Birmingham—suggests, racial prejudice can be overcome if it conflicts with more pressing interests: “We got to get together and organize the niggahs and whites into one strong general union” (Kelley 2015, p. 28). Kelley (2015) notes, too, that several former KKK members joined the vehemently anti-racist, and, in Alabama, largely African American, Communist Party USA in the 1930s, as the racial prejudice of these “Klansmen gone Red” was outweighed by their common cause with black sharecroppers and workers (*ibid.*; see too Regensburger 1987 pp. 162-169; Gilmore 2008 pp. 86-92). In both the relatively mundane circumstances of unionizing interracial workforces, and the more atypical instances of largescale interracial social movements, white antipathy is, at least temporarily, allayed, while the social structures that are responsible for racial inequality are effectively challenged. What needs to be explained is why new racialized social structures emerge from the rubble of interracial economic and

social movements. If the “endogenous linkages” of cumulative causation are broken, how and why are they reestablished?

A third attempt to overcome the objectification of racialized social structures offers a plausible, albeit incomplete, answer to the latter question. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that racialized social structures “remain in place for the same reason that other structures do”: Social structures remain in place because they benefit dominant members of the society (p. 9). As Gilpin (1999) put it: “Actors enter social relations and create social structures in order to advance particular sets of political, economic, or other types of interests...[A]lthough social systems impose restraints on the behavior of all actors, the behavior rewarded and punished by the system will coincide, at least initially, with the interests of the most powerful members of the social system” (p. 9). Racialized social structures are no exception: “Since actors racialized as ‘white’—or as members of the dominant race—receive material benefits from the racial order, they struggle...to maintain their privileges...Therein lies the secret of racial structures and racial inequality the world over. They exist because they benefit members of the dominant race” (Bonilla-Silva 2014, p. 9).

While this “secret” may appear obvious at first blush, it is conspicuously absent from the seminal accounts within the structural racism paradigm. Wilson (2012) and Sharkey (2013) rely primarily upon structural inertia and the self-perpetuation of racial inequality; Massey & Denton (1993) rely upon a free-floating and exogenous version of “white antipathy” to account for the persistence of racial

inequality;⁶ and Galster (1988 & 1992) provides justification for this “white antipathy” in the social pathologies of the black underclass. Racial inequality is perpetuated because agents passively abide by the dictates of social structure, or because whites rationally (Galster) or irrationally (Massey & Denton) abhor blacks. The social, material, and psychological advantages that whites accrue relative to blacks are not considered operative in the perpetuation of racial inequality, and are often mentioned only incidentally. However, treating the perpetuation of racial inequality as a function of the interests of the dominant race (i.e., whites) overcomes both the objectification of social structure (racialized social structures are perpetuated because whites have an interest in their perpetuation), and the causal reliance upon white antipathy which is itself not given a cause (see *supra* note 4). Like Galster’s cumulative causation thesis, though, it is unable to account for the dynamics of racial inequality (namely the various bouts of interracial solidarity), and, more problematically, assumes that the benefits of racial inequality accrue equally and in similar ways to all members of the dominant race. While racial inequality may benefit all whites *relative* to non-whites, it does not benefit all whites *absolutely*. This is especially the case for white workers, whose wages, for instance, are pulled down when competing in the same labor market with non-whites whose wages are artificially deflated by discriminatory wage policies—hence the persistence of lower

⁶ In an especially perceptive review, Asad Haider likens the treatment of racism in this vein to magic: it is construed as a “malevolent force” that “has no history;” it is a “moralizing discourse which monopolizes the discussion of race, yet fails to propose either a coherent theory of racial oppression or a viable program for eliminating it” (Haider 2017).

wages in the South relative to the rest of the US (Roemer 1979; Katznelson 2013 pp. 241-242). Indeed, contrary to prevailing perceptions, even slaves—at least 19.3% of which in 1860 would have been classified as semi-skilled or skilled artisans—competed extensively against poor whites, displacing them and lowering wages in agriculture, mining, factory work, longshore, canal digging, and the majority of skilled labor occupations in large southern cities (Starobin 1975; Goldfield 1997, p. 107; Post 2012, p. 126;). While white workers certainly benefited from slavery relative to black slaves and freedmen and women, this was not the case absolutely, as “abolition was surely in the immediate interests of poor southern whites, whose best chance to live well was in the freeing and subsequent raising of the living standards of their slave competitors” (Goldfield 1997, p. 107). The same can be said for more contemporary iterations of racialized wage scales.

In sum, theories of structural racism are largely unable to explain the persistence and evolution of racial inequality in the US. Seminal works within the paradigm, like Wilson ([1987] 2012) and Sharkey (2013) reify the social structures that they argue are responsible for the perpetuation of racial inequality, untenably relying upon the self-perpetuation of racialized social structures in the absence of an actual causal mechanism grounded in the actions of real individuals in society; Massey & Denton (1993) and Galster (1988 & 1992) avoid this structural reification by relying upon differing notions of white racism for the perpetuation of racialized social structures, but are still unable to account for the dynamism of racial inequality and the extremely consequential instances of interracial solidarity that effectively

challenge the racial status quo. Bonilla-Silva (2014) brings us closer to a plausible explanation for the persistence of racial inequality by grounding racialized social structures causally in the interests of members of the dominant race (whites), but problematically assumes that the benefits of racial inequality accrue equally and similarly to all members of the dominant race. None of this is to say that each of these accounts of the perpetuation of racial inequality are totally without merit. Indeed, while failing to explain *why* racial inequality has persisted over time, each work adroitly describes the mechanisms through which racial inequality has persisted—at least since the early 20th century. In other words, theories of structural racism have been adept at explaining *how* racial inequality has persisted, while unsuccessfully explaining *why* it has persisted.⁷

⁷ Theodore Allen (2012) conceptualizes this issue similarly when he states his focus as “primarily not on *why* the bourgeoisie in continental Anglo-America had recourse to that anachronistic form of labor, slavery, but rather on *how* they could establish and maintain for such a long historical period that degree of *social control* without which no motive of profit or prejudice could have effect” (Vol. 1, p. 1, emphasis in original).

SECTION 2: THEORETICAL FRAME

I attempt to remedy this by locating the causal impetus of racialized social structures in the class relations of the US. While, as I will argue, racial inequality is grounded in class relations, it is not reducible to them. Bonilla-Silva (1997) and others have critiqued class-based explanations of racial inequality on the grounds that race/racism is treated in an “idealist fashion[;] Racism, in [these] accounts, is an ideology that emerged with chattel slavery and other forms of class oppression to justify the exploitation of people of color and survives as a residue of the past” (pp. 466-467). Subsequent class-based accounts, while grounding race in social relations, “do so by ultimately subordinating racial matters to class matters” (p. 467). If we take Bonilla-Silva’s critique at its word, a class-based account of racial inequality must (1) be grounded in social relations and not idealism, (2) must not treat race as a “residue of the past,” but as a continually socially operative phenomenon, and (3) must not reduce racial matters to class matters. While Bonilla-Silva largely assumes that any account of racial phenomenon that does one of these things is incorrect—besides tacit allusion to reductionism, no explanation is given as to why parameter (3) is automatically wrong—I believe these parameters provide a useful guideline for constructing any theory of racial inequality.

Racism, taken as an ideological phenomenon, does little to explain the persistence of racial inequality, especially when analyzing post-Jim Crow race relations (see *ibid.* pp. 467-469 for a more in-depth discussion). As a result, some scholars, like Ignatiev (1995), “consider the term [‘racism’] useless” (p. 178).

However, Ignatiev's consideration goes too far, while not going far enough. While survey data purporting to measure racism can be useful in explaining some socio-political phenomenon—such as Kuziemko & Washington's (2015) study of the South's 1963 shift from Democratic Party bastion to Republican Party mainstay using proxy data for racial ideology—popular and scholarly accounts that overemphasize ideological racism to the exclusion of all other factors leads one to the conclusion that racism, as an element in the perpetuation of racial inequality, may actually be worse than useless, serving to distort the actual causal mechanisms involved. The theory presented in what follows, then, while treating racism ideologically—primarily as a doctrine of justification—places little, if any, causal emphasis upon racism as an ideology. Since race/racial inequality is a continually operative social phenomenon, it will also not be treated as a “residue of the past,” but as a dynamic and extremely adaptable element of historic and contemporary social relations. Additionally, racial oppression will not be subordinated or reduced to “class matters,” insofar as class-based theories of racial inequality actually do this. Indeed, while the allegation of reductionism is a fairly common methodological rebuttal, Bonilla-Silva's critique seems to treat class not as an objective relationship to the means of production—as the theories he critiques do, namely Cox (1959)—but as an informal grouping of individuals based on their income, in the manner of the more colloquial usage of the word. Put another way, such critiques rarely address class-based theories of racial inequality on their own ground, hence the heretofore lack of overlap in the largely class-based white supremacy literature (e.g.,

Morgan 2003; Allen 2012; Fredrickson 1982; Cell 1985; Goldfield 1997), and the largely class-dismissive structural racism literature surveyed above. Critics of class-based theories of racial inequality also seem to imply, more or less overtly, that such theories make the case that class oppressions are somehow more “real” or “objective” than race-based oppressions; that the elimination of class-based oppression will automatically entail the elimination of race-based oppression, or, alternatively, that as blacks improve their class position, racial oppression is allayed or eliminated (see Roediger 2007, pp. 6-11 for an overview). Each of these claims are, of course, false, and, to the extent that class-based theories of racial inequality make similar claims, they must be rejected (although most do not)⁸. Race-based oppressions are very real, a classless society is not necessarily a raceless society, and non-whites suffer from racial oppression regardless of their class position (however defined).⁹

Consistent with these critiques, the theory presented in what follows will avoid the fallacies of other class-based theories of racial inequality, adhering to the

⁸ There are, of course, examples of political activism predicated upon class-based analyses of social relations that rejected the primacy, or even the existence, of distinctly racial oppression as opposed to class oppression. Leaders of the Socialist Party of America (SP), for instance, if not outspoken racists like Victor Berger and his followers, were at best apathetic when it came to race. As perennial SP presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs put it in 1903, “We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races” (Debs 1903; see, too, Green 1980). Nevertheless, party lines ought not to serve as strawmen for developed theories.

⁹ While countless empirical studies have confirmed this latter point, the recent violent arrest of multimillionaire NFL lineman Michael Bennett, guilty of “simply being a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time,” provides a vivid illustration (Stahl 2017).

following empirical constraints: (1) racial inequality must be grounded in social relations, not ideology, (2) the causes and effects of racial inequality must be treated as a continually operative social phenomenon, (3) racial oppression must not be reduced to class oppression, (4) racial oppression must be considered just as “real” as class oppression, (5) it must not be assumed that the end of class is also the end of race, and (6) racial oppression must be treated as a phenomenon that affects all non-whites, regardless of class position. Class is treated as an objective relationship to the means of production, not as hierarchy of income scales: the working class is defined as encompassing all those who sell their capacity to labor for wages; capitalists are defined as those who own the means of production and generate profit through the exploitation of their employees (see Hyman 1975). While this is a radical simplification, I concur with Wright (2000) when he says that “this abstract, polarized description of class relations in capitalism can still be useful in clarifying real mechanisms that actual actors face and is thus a useful point of departure” (p. 961). Other distinct class positions can be easily assimilated to such a conceptualization of class relations, (e.g., the “petite bourgeoisie,” or small-business owners, share many of the same interests of large-scale capitalists, as do the “middle class” of non-capital owning managers (Wright 1997)), or can be considered as being occupied by former and/or potential members of these classes (e.g., the “lumpenproletariat” or the “underclass”).¹⁰

¹⁰ Much has been read into the independent and progressive political potential of this latter group, especially those activists and writers influenced by the work of Frantz Fanon. However, emphasis on the lumpenproletariat—especially in the

These two major classes—capitalists and the working class—have inherently contradictory¹¹ material interests, and it is assumed that each class pursues these material interests¹² through whatever means at its disposal. Thus, class relations are typified as being an “unceasing *power struggle*” (Hyman 1975, p. 26, emphasis in original). Workers can pursue their material interests individually (through mobility), or collectively, through what Wright (2000) has characterized as “associational power,” or “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers” (p. 962). Of course, workers rarely, if ever, unite as an entire class, but often do so through smaller collective organizations that represent workers in a particular occupation or industry (i.e., unions), or that represent workers of a particular subset of the working class (i.e., race, ethnic, and/or gender exclusive organizations) (see Brenner & Brenner 1981). Capitalists can also pursue their material interests individually (again, through mobility, but also through intimidation/outright violence, and mechanization), and collectively through

case of the US—is borne out of either a misreading of Fanon’s work (which explicitly addressed the colonial situation, necessitating that class analysis be “slightly stretched” (Fanon [1961] 2004, p. 5), or a conflation of colonial oppression with racial oppression (See Allen 2012, Vol. 1 pp. 69-70, 81-82). The formation of the Detroit branch of the Black Panther Party by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was, at least partially, an attempt to rectify these theoretical fallacies present in radical African-American political activism (Geschwender 1979, pp. 140-142).

¹¹ A social phenomenon is “contradictory” when “there are multiple conditions for the reproduction of a system which cannot all be simultaneously satisfied” (Wright 1995, p. 18). Profits cannot be maximized if wages are also maximized.

¹² It must be emphasized that these interests are neither eternal (i.e., ahistorical) or somehow attributable to “human nature,” but are economic imperatives unique to the social property relations of capitalism as it has developed historically. See Brenner 2007, pp. 57-59.

collusion (e.g., wage-setting, mergers, etc.) and combination (e.g., the National Association of Manufacturers, countless chambers of commerce, etc.) (Schwartz 1987). Most importantly, both classes can vie for the support of the state through political parties, lobbying, financing of election campaigns, etc. As will be discussed in detail, though, the interests of capitalists are heavily favored by the state, due to its unique structural position in a capitalist economy (Block 1977).

However, while the “unceasing power struggle” of class conflict may, at times, be violent, coercive, and unrestrained, class relations are often maintained and perpetuated through a series of concessions given by each opposing class to the other. These “class compromises” allay class conflict, providing “material bases of consent” for the newly established terrain of class relations (Wright 2000, p. 964). Crucially, in this formulation, each class has a genuine, material rationale for abiding by the dictates of the class compromise—they are not “mystified” by an ideological superstructure to act in ways antithetical to their own interests, as orthodox Marxists have contended.¹³ Rather, each class has a vested interest in the perpetuation of the class compromise. Nevertheless, not all class compromises are alike: some generate strong incentives for their perpetuation, while others are unstable and quickly altered. Wright (2000) provides a useful typology: a class compromise is “negative” if it is initiated to avoid “mutual damage” to either side—concessions are given by both classes (even extremely asymmetrical concessions) to prevent

¹³ See Wood 2016, pp. 19-75 for a useful discussion of base and superstructure in Marxian thought.

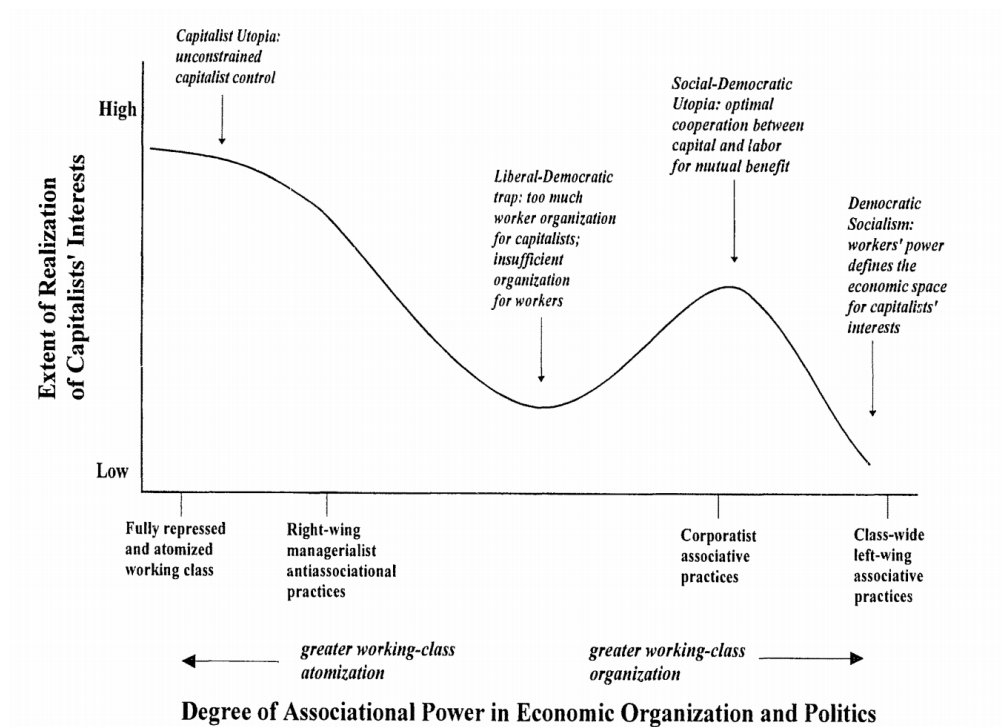
presumed bilateral losses (pp. 957-958). A negative class compromise is, by its very nature, unstable, as it “represents a compromise unsatisfactory to *both* parties”—while both sides benefit relative to a situation not characterized by a class compromise (hence they are incentivized to perpetuate it), each side still concedes particular interests that it would prefer not to, given ideal circumstances (Hyman 1975, p. 27, emphasis in original). Thus, the contours and terms of the negative class compromise will shift along with the balance of class forces, or, in other words, “whenever either side feels that circumstances are in its favor” (ibid.). A “positive” class compromise, on the other hand, is a “form of mutual cooperation between opposing classes” in which “both parties can improve their position” simultaneously (Wright 2000, p. 958). Since both sides actively benefit from cooperation, a positive class compromise is relatively stable, as it provides strong incentives for both classes to perpetuate its terms.

Wright (2000) primarily uses the concept of a positive class compromise normatively; he attempts to locate an ideal ratio between the associational power of the working class and the realization of the material interests of capitalists, wherein the interests of both are maximized. Whereas the inherently unstable negative class compromise represents a zero-sum game between capital and the working class, Wright posits the “possibility of a non-zero-sum game” (p. 958). He argues that “once working-class power crosses some threshold, [it] begins to have positive effects on capitalists’ interests” (ibid. p. 959). Specifically, when this threshold is reached, it “allow[s] for significant gains in productivity and rates of profit due to such

things as high levels of bargained cooperation between workers and capitalists, rationalized systems of skill upgrading and job training, enhanced capacity for solving macroeconomic problems, and a greater willingness of workers to accept technological change given the relative job security they achieve because of union protections” (ibid. p. 960). In essence, strong unions and other forms of worker organization can, under certain circumstances, solve collective action problems capitalists face that, otherwise, they would have no way of solving.

This relationship is illustrated conceptually in *Figure 1*. The x-axis represents the associational power of the working class, with associational power increasing from left to right. The y-axis represents the realization of the material interests of capitalists, increasing from bottom to top. From the first, far-left peak of the graphed line to the first trough, the inverse relationship between the associational power of the working class and the realization of the material interests of capitalists is depicted. As the associational power of the working class increases, the realization of the material interests of capitalists decreases. At the first trough, though, the “threshold” of associational power is reached, allowing for the non-zero-sum game of the positive class compromise to commence, reversing this inverse relationship. The second, far-right peak represents the optimal cooperation between both classes, what Wright calls a “social-democratic utopia.” After this point, the inverse relationship becomes operative again until capitalists are eliminated entirely.

Figure 1: Wright's Normative Positive Class Compromise



Source: Wright 2000, p. 987

As a normative exercise, Wright's formulation of a positive class compromise provides an empirical rationale for the benefits of social democracy. Descriptively, the model also suggests that the differences in class relations between relatively stable social democracies (e.g., the Scandinavian countries) and less stable non-social democracies is due to the presence (or lack thereof) of a positive class compromise between capitalists and the working class (pp. 992-995). However, if we move from this highly abstract level of analysis to the more concrete instances of actual class formation, the notion of a positive class compromise becomes

extremely useful as a conceptual model in explaining the persistence of racial inequality in the US (see Wright 1997 pp. 8-16 for a discussion of the levels of abstraction in class analysis). Such a model would take into account how the US working class has actually organized to pursue its interests (both inclusively as a class-based movement, and exclusively in its race and gender-based iterations), it would take into account the extremely consequential role of the state, and it would be able to explain theoretically the historical dynamism and evolution of white supremacy over time.

In constructing this model, I rely on the work of Piven & Cloward ([1971] 1993) and Goldfield (1989). Both works attempt to establish causal links between broad social movements and relief policies (e.g., social welfare, ostensibly pro-labor legislation, etc.) which are “designed to mute civil disorder” (Piven & Cloward 1993, p. xv). In this formulation, the state serves as a conciliatory mechanism between capitalists and the working class: the state initiates pro-working class policies to assuage social unrest triggered by class antagonisms (Goldfield 1989, p. 1265). The working class benefits—at least in the short-term—from the conciliatory policies, and capitalists benefit—in the short and long term—from the muting of civil disorder and the re-establishment of the social control necessary for the perpetuation of a capitalist economy. Subsequently, as social unrest subsides, the conciliatory policies are contracted or eliminated, which eventually culminate in another wave of social unrest and a new set of conciliatory policies (Piven & Cloward 1993. pp. 45, 123-145). In sum, there is a cyclical pattern between “long periods of restrictiveness

[that] are interrupted periodically by short periods of liberalization,” predicated upon the level of working class militancy (ibid. p. 35). While Piven & Cloward emphasize the effectiveness of “spontaneous, unorganized, [and] disruptive threats of the poor and underrepresented,” Goldfield (1989) refines the thesis by stressing the integral role of “highly organized radical organizations not only in organizing social protest but in tactical and strategic planning as well” (Goldfield 1989, p. 1264). Unorganized and nebulously defined social movements do not win concessions; highly organized social movements with economic leverage often do.

Implicit in both of these accounts is a conceptualization of the state as a perpetuator of the long-term interests of the capitalist class. Working class concessions are predicated solely on the working class’ ability to disrupt the routine operation of the economy, not on the state’s (or individual politicians’) benevolence (ibid. pp. 1274-1276).¹⁴ Hence the contraction or elimination of social welfare policies after the cessation of working class militancy: the impetus of the state to initiate pro-working class policies is eliminated. While the working class may ostensibly benefit from the concessionary policies, these benefits are entirely incidental to the muting of civil disorder and the reestablishment of labor/social control. The concessions may not benefit capitalists immediately—in fact, by definition, they do not—but by assuaging or removing the threat of working class

¹⁴ Similar conceptually, though ultimately untenable, Karl Polanyi’s work ([1944] 2001) relies primarily upon the benevolence of the state in assuaging working class deprivations, while largely ignoring working class agency. See Silver 2003, pp. 17-18.

militancy, it allows for the peaceful perpetuation of capitalist social property relations over time.¹⁵ The reason for the state's willingness to conform to the long-term interests of capitalists, however, may not be obvious—especially if interpreted through the lens of theories that treat the state as an “autonomous” (or “relatively autonomous”) entity, such as pluralism, or the various “faces of power” approaches. Beyond several methodological errors inherent to theories of state autonomy, the primary fallacy of these theories consists in decontextualizing the state from most, if not all, of the social processes that occur outside of the state's extremely narrowly defined purview (see Peterson 1981; Calavita 1984, pp. 5-18; Goldfield 1989, pp. 1259-1268; Goldfield 1990; Stone 2012). Such a decontextualization, among other things, ignores the imperatives foisted upon the state by its structural location in a capitalist economy. In other words, the state can only be defined as autonomous if its structural position is taken for granted—and thus unanalyzed.

While capitalists are often able to dominate political affairs financially—through campaign contributions, lobbying, control of the media, pork-barreling, etc.—and are able to do so successfully given the institutional biases of the state (so-called “second face of power” factors), theoretical attempts to explain these conditions often end in question-begging and circular reasoning (Bachrach & Baratz 1962; Block 1977, p. 14; Koenig 1987). Indeed, Calavita (1984) regards such claims as “not a theory at all but an empirical generalization” (p. 6). Block's (1977) work on

¹⁵ Allen (2012) notes that capitalists often forgo immediate benefits (e.g., profits) to guarantee long-term social control (Vol. 1, p. 137). See, too, Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin 2002, pp. 134-136.

the existence of a “ruling class” largely overcomes these shortcomings by contextualizing the state within a capitalist economy. Block argues that there are major structural constraints on the agency of the state, predicated on the necessity of maintaining a certain level of funding (through taxes and borrowing), and on individual “state managers” maintaining their positions within the state (p. 15). In other words, the continued existence of the state depends upon the profitable operation of the economy: short of the nationalization of industry, the state can only operate if funded by taxes (taken directly from capitalists, and/or indirectly from the workers they employ) and capital investments; additionally, support for the ruling political regime will “decline sharply if the regime presides over a serious drop in the level of economic activity, with a parallel rise in unemployment and shortages of key goods” (ibid.). As a consequence of this, the likelihood of the regime being removed from power “one way or another” increases exponentially (ibid.). If the primary imperatives of the state are (a) to maintain levels of funding necessary for continued operation, and (b) to maintain levels of support necessary for the ruling regime to maintain their rule, then the state must attend to the long-term interests of the capitalist class, regardless of individual politicians’ ideological commitments. This structural commitment to the long-term interests of the capitalist class is perhaps most vividly illustrated by those instances in which capitalists themselves, pursuing their short-term interests, oppose policies meant to advance their long-term interests. Put another way, those cases in which imperatives (a) and (b) are the *only* operative causes of state action, not the financial influence of capitalists. A

particularly consequential example of this was capital's opposition, especially after 1934, to the New Deal. As Piven & Cloward (1993) put it, "when this rupture came, Roosevelt was outraged, for he saw himself and his administration as the saviors of capitalism and the business classes—despite themselves" (pp. 84-85). Furthermore, when capital interests conflict, as in the tariff debates of the mid-19th century, the state can be relied upon to pursue the long-term interests of capital, even when facing intense opposition from certain sectors of the capitalist class (Goldfield 2007, p. 132).

SECTION 3: WHITE SUPREMACY AS POSITIVE CLASS COMPROMISE

A brief summary of what has been established thus far is perhaps in order: The inherently antagonistic class relations between workers and capitalists are often perpetuated and hegemonized through concessionary compromises. These compromises are ‘positive’ if they are predicated upon mutually beneficial cooperation, or ‘negative’ if they are predicated upon an unstable *modus vivendi* wherein both parties are unsatisfied with the contours of the compromise, but abide by its dictates to avoid bilateral losses. The state, in its structural role as the perpetuator of the long-term interests of the capitalist class, is often the initiator and guarantor of these compromises. In this role, the state responds to the social unrest of the working class, granting concessions to workers in order to mitigate their continued militancy. Once the social/labor control necessary to perpetuate the profitable operation of the economy is reestablished, these concessions are gradually rescinded, often resulting in a new wave of social unrest. If we move to a more concrete level of analysis—specifically actual instances of class formation in the US—such a framework becomes extremely useful in explaining various socio-political phenomena, e.g., the transformation and perpetuation of white supremacy in the US.

It is my primary contention that white supremacy is the principle method through which interracial, class-based social movements are mitigated and eliminated in the US. This mitigation subsequently establishes sufficient levels of social/labor control to stably perpetuate relatively peaceful class relations over time.

I conceptualize white supremacy as a positive class compromise—rendered by the state, but at the behest, directly or indirectly (structurally), of the capitalist class—between the *white* working class and the capitalist class. The white working class is given concessions to abate their level of social unrest at the expense or exclusion of the non-white working class. While, as I have stated previously, Piven & Cloward (1993) and Goldfield (1989) both demonstrate the concessionary response of the state in periods of broad social unrest, these concessions are, critically, meant to discourage interracial solidarity and shift class antagonisms horizontally into race antagonisms (See Allen 2012, Vol. 2, pp. 258-259). The compromises which constitute the ever-dynamic regimes of white supremacy over time are ‘positive’ because they are mutually beneficial, thus giving strong incentives for both parties (the white working class and the capitalist class) to perpetuate the terms of the compromise over time. The white working class benefits from the exclusionary concessions, while the capitalist class benefits from the cessation/mitigation of class antagonism and the shift in white working class animus—all at the expense of the non-white working class, and the long-term interests of the working class as a whole. The racially divisive concessions of the positive class compromise, while assuaging social unrest generally, also works to impede interracial solidarity by giving white workers a material basis for the perpetuation of the white supremacist regime; creating the political space necessary for the white working class to pursue its interests in racial terms, rather than in class terms. The positive class compromise of white supremacy, then, shifts white working class activism to race-based socio-

political movements, the goals of which are to maintain racial advantage relative to non-whites; hence the continued pervasiveness of popularly maintained political regimes of racial exclusion, as well as racially repressive, right-wing populist movements (Berlet & Lyons 2000). In other words, white supremacy creates a social, legal, and economic context wherein the immediate interests of white workers consists in maintaining and expanding their racial advantage to the disadvantage of non-whites. Such a context discourages interracial, class-based solidarity by encouraging interclass, race-based solidarity.

Racial inequality, then, is the continued consequence of white supremacist regimes established to quell interracial class-based social movements. While established at the behest of the capitalist class to ensure the long-term operation of a profitable economy, it is maintained largely by the white working class: because the structured incentives of the positive class compromise encourage race-based class formation, white workers are incentivized to perpetuate the terms of the white supremacist regime—hence, the often virulent opposition of working class whites to non-white activism. Like Wright, I illustrate this more concrete version of a positive class compromise conceptually in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: White Supremacy as Positive Class Compromise

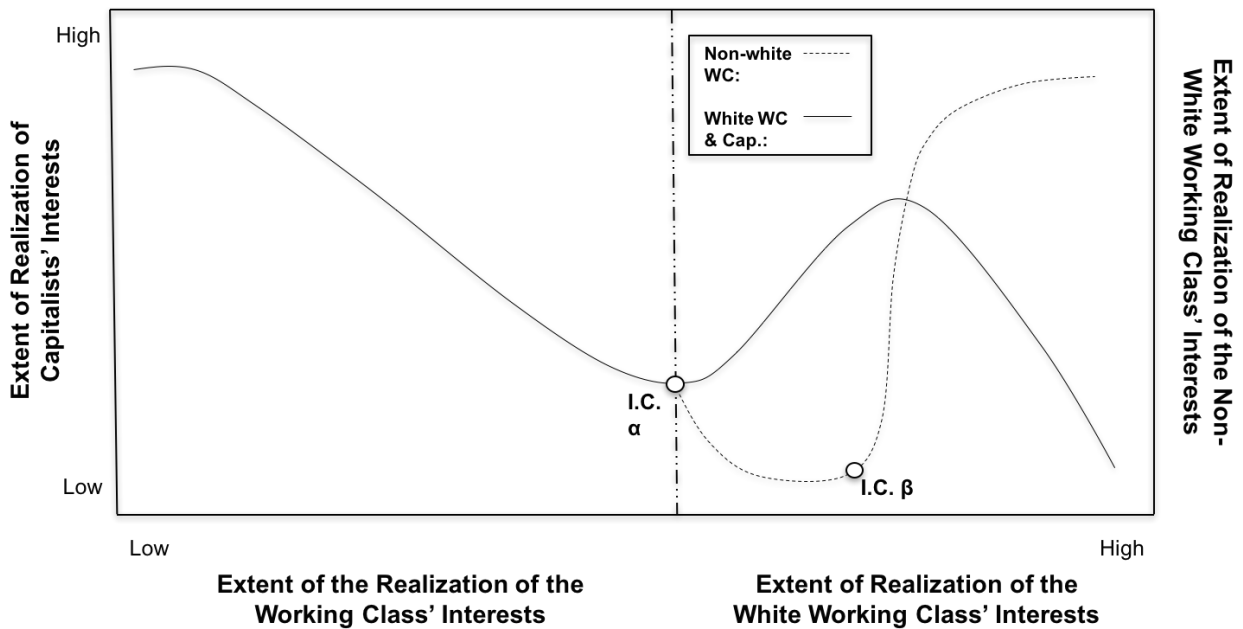


Figure 2 is divided (vertically) into two parts. The first (left) section illustrates the inverse relationship between the working class and the capitalist class. Rather than a measure of the associational power of the working class, as in Wright's model, the x-axis represents the realization of the interests of the working class, increasing from left to right. The y-axis represents the realization of the interests of the capitalist class, increasing from bottom to top. As the realization of the interests of the working class increases, the realization of the interests of the capitalist class decreases. The point marked "I.C. α" represents a broad, interracial class-based social movement that is quelled by the implementation of a regime of white supremacy. It is at this point where the interests of the white and non-white working

class diverge. The graphed solid line in this second (right) section represents the relationship between the realization of the interests of the white working class and the capitalist class. Unlike the first section, as the realization of the interests of one class increases, so does the realization of the interests of the other class; denoting a positive class compromise. However, this positive class compromise is only possible if the interests of the non-white working class decrease concurrently, indicated by the dashed line. The point marked “I.C. β ” represents a broad, interracial class-based social movement that is not quelled by a regime of white supremacy. At this point, as the realization of the interests of one part of the working class increases, the realization of the interests of the other part of the working class increases as well—all at the expense of the capitalist class.

Since both the white working class and the capitalist class mutually benefit from the terms of the white supremacist regimes—represented by the solid line from I.C. α to the crest on its right—they are both strongly incentivized to perpetuate it over time. Such a conceptualization rejects simplistic and unidimensional accounts that conceive of white supremacy as emanating solely from the working class (e.g., some versions of the spilt labor market theory), or solely from the capitalist class, who use their superstructural power to mystify the working class from pursuing their true interests with ideological racism (see Brown 2000). Non-whites, because the mutual advantage of the white working class and the capitalist class is predicated on their disadvantage, are highly incentivized to resist this state of affairs—and have done so historically. Non-white working class agency is integral to this model—

unlike models based on theories of structural racism—as their resistance to the status quo of white supremacy is often indispensable to the initiation of interracial class-based movements. As illustrated by both the solid line and the dashed line after point I.C. β , the absolute interests of the working class are tied inextricably to the interracial solidarity of the working class. As stated previously, this indicates that while white workers may benefit relative to non-white workers under the terms of white supremacist regimes, they do not do so absolutely (see Reich 1981).

SECTION 4: TOWARDS AN HISTORICAL SUBSTANTIATION

Although such a discussion will be, by necessity, cursory and partial, I will now attempt fill in the theoretical 'blank spaces' with historical data. I focus on the three major regimes of white supremacy in the US: the "invention" of whiteness and the racialization of slavery in the mid to late 17th century; the establishment and refinement of Jim Crow from the late 19th century to the early 20th century; and the current regime predicated primarily upon de facto residential segregation, stemming from New Deal legislation like the HOLC, the FHA, and the VA. Each regime was preceded by a largescale, interracial, class-based social movement, and, in turn, each of these movements was ultimately mitigated or eliminated by the implementation of legal regimes that assuaged white working class militancy through socio-economic concessions, while discouraging interracial solidarity by giving white workers a material stake in the white supremacist regime. This "material basis of consent" to the positive class compromise often effectively shifted white working class animus towards non-whites, rather than towards the capitalist class.

The "invention" of whiteness, as Allen (2012 Vol. 2) puts it, refers broadly to the shift in colonial Virginia's labor and social policies from the mid to late 17th century. This period saw a major demographic transformation in the colony's workforce—predominantly consisting of agricultural (tobacco) laborers—from one based almost entirely on English and Irish indentured servants, to one based almost entirely on African slaves. Prior to this shift, race, as a socially consequential category, was largely nonexistent: as Morgan (2003) illustrates in great detail, early

colonial “interracial” cooperation between the English and Africans “seems to have been untroubled by racial prejudice,” especially when it came to servant-slave relations (p. 13). The English ruling class was more than willing, at least initially, to treat African “Cimarrons”—settlements of escaped (Spanish) slaves—on equal footing, even romanticizing them as brave and noble liberators (p. 10-24). European servants and African slaves worked indiscriminately together, regularly fraternized, with interracial sexual contact a relatively frequent phenomenon (Allen (Vol. 2) reports that “fornication” occurred disproportionately between African males and European women (p. 161)). European servants and African slaves also regularly ran away together, and, critically, “provid[ing] the supreme proof that the white race did not then exist,” rebelled with each other in an attempt to abolish the economic system that violently coerced, oppressed, and exploited both groups (Allen 2012 Vol. 2 p. 153-154, 215). Morgan (2003) summarizes this state of affairs succinctly when he says that the color difference between servants and slaves “struck them as only skin deep,” as they “initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament” (p. 327).

The historiographical debate centers around Morgan’s ([1975] 2003) “better buy” thesis and Allen’s (2012) social control thesis. The former claims that the racialization of slavery in the mid-17th century—i.e., the phasing-out of European indenture and the subsequent reliance on African slaves for agricultural labor—was based on the rising life expectancy of the laboring class, and simple economic logic: African slaves were too expensive of an investment in the pre-1660 period because

life expectancy was so low; it was simply cheaper to import (often coercively) an indentured servant who would have little chance of surviving until the end of his indenture, than a much more expensive lifetime slave who would live just as long (Morgan 2003, pp. 295-305). As life expectancy began to grow after 1660, the opposite became true, as lifetime slaves became a better investment than temporarily indentured Europeans (for similar arguments, see, Fredrickson 1982, pp. 62-69; Breen 1973). Allen's social control thesis claims, however, that the racialization of slavery was predicated solely upon the imperative to control the extremely rebellion-prone workforce "without which no motive of profit...could have had effect" (Vol. I, p. 1). Allen argues convincingly that economic motives—like those emphasized by Morgan—can only be effective if the labor force is sufficiently docile to ensure the continued operation of the economy. Allen claims that the immediate impetus for the racialization of slavery was Bacon's Rebellion (especially the later—1676-1677—"civil war" phase), a largescale and militant rebellion of both indentured servants and African slaves against the landholding elite, which culminated in the sacking and immolation of Jamestown by the interracial rebels (Vol. II pp. 203-222). As a result of this instance of largescale, class-based civil unrest—and others, e.g., the plant-cutting riots of the early 1680s—a system of white supremacy was deliberately introduced by the colonial state wherein Europeans of the laboring class were given a series of privileges (i.e., concessions) to "break up the solidarity of black and white," by "enlist[ing] the poor whites in the social control apparatus of the ruling class" (Allen 1975, p. 9). In other words,

European laborers—now white laborers—were given a material stake in the perpetuation of the racialization of slavery: the first white supremacist regime.¹⁶

Morgan, while placing ultimate causal impetus on simple economic logic, concedes that the establishment of white supremacy was the “obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized” means to “separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt” (p. 328). Rather than a conscious and deliberate attempt by the colonial state to foster interracial antipathy though, white supremacy was simply an unthinking, but fortuitous (for the planter class) result of the economically-driven racialization of slavery. This antipathy was later deliberately fostered as its utility in assuaging interracial social unrest became apparent (i.e., after Bacon’s Rebellion) (ibid. p. 331, 345). This is to say that Morgan’s and Allen’s theses are less divergent than they appear to be: both conceive of the deliberate fostering of white supremacist regimes as an effective strategy in mitigating and eliminating interracial solidarity. Both argue, in different terms, that white workers were given social, political, psychological, and economic concessions by the state in a deliberate attempt to “align [their interests] with their exploiters” (ibid. p. 344). White workers were given a “material basis” to perpetuate the terms

¹⁶ According to Allen (1975), “the white-skin privileges of the poor free whites were simply reflexes of the disabilities imposed on the Negro slave: to move about freely without a pass; to marry without any upper-class consent; to change employment; to vote in elections in accordance with the laws on qualifications; to acquire property; and last but not least, in this partial list, the right of self-defense” (p. 11). The exclusive opportunity to be employed in those lucrative occupations that directly controlled slaves (e.g., overseers, fugitive slave hunters, etc.) should also be acknowledged (ibid. p. 12).

of the white supremacist regime, while the planter class reaped the rewards of a pacified class struggle.

This version of the white supremacist positive class compromise lasted largely unchanged until the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. I suggest, in passing but with concurrence of W.E.B. DuBois, that the Civil War and subsequent period of Reconstruction comes closest to what I have characterized as I.C. β in the positive class compromise model; representing an interracial, class-based movement that is not overcome by a regime of white supremacy. Indeed, DuBois characterizes Reconstruction as a prospective “dictatorship of labor,” or, in even more radical terms, a “dictatorship of the proletariat” (see, for instance, DuBois [1935] 1998, p. 583). As several commentators have pointed out, even the post-Reconstruction “Redemption” period “did not...inaugurate any revolution in the customs of laws governing racial relations” (Woodward [1955] 2002, p. 31). Schwartz (1988) is more unequivocal when he says that “there were no explicitly racist laws, and hardly any laws that were overtly racist in nature” adopted during the period (p. 9). Nevertheless, the second major regime of white supremacy was established in the late 19th century in the Southern US, but was not solidified as a system until the 1920s (see Bloom 1987, p. 52). According to the now canonical Woodward thesis, based on C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, the gradual, state by state, establishment of legally-enforced segregation in the South—more than 15 years after the end of Reconstruction—was a conscious attempt by planter-capitalists and Democratic party leaders (often one and the

same) to disenfranchise and disempower white and black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who had effectively organized both economically in various Farmers' Alliances and "Agricultural Wheels," and politically as the Populist Party.¹⁷

The Farmers' Alliances—interracially composed if not completely racially integrated (especially in those states that would later boast the most repressive of Jim Crow regimes, like Mississippi; see Schwartz 1988 p. 101)—challenged merchant and landlord dominance of the Southern cotton economy through cooperative crop marketing, cooperative stores, opposition (through boycott) to monopoly and land enclosure (for cattle), while allying itself with the broader labor movement (i.e., the Knights of Labor) (McMath 1975, pp. 17-24). McMath characterized the Alliances as the "largest, most violently class-oriented labor upheaval" in the history of the South (p. 22); Bloom (1987), citing a contemporary observer, similarly characterizes the movement—which enrolled at least 1.5 million members at its peak in 1891—as the "menace of black and white lower class united against [the white elite's] rule...the most dangerous and insidious foe of white supremacy" (pp. 42, 48).¹⁸ The movement later congealed into the extremely successful Populist Party, winning state and national elections throughout the South, notably sweeping both houses of North Carolina's General Assembly in 1894 (Korstad 2003, p. 50). The party's platform—at least rhetorically anti-capitalist—

¹⁷ The Woodward thesis was confirmed by various subsequent historical and empirical studies, the best of which are Cell 1985; James 1988; Kousser 1975; Korstad 2003; Bloom 1987.

¹⁸ See, too, Cell (1985) who describes the movement as "the most significant internal challenge to the hegemony of white supremacy until the 1960s" (p. 123).

specifically included the “regulation of trusts, revision of the lien laws in favor of the farmers, lowered interest rates, extension of public schools..., removal of convict labor, an end to child labor, and state regulation of the measurement of the production of miners” (Bloom 1987, p. 39). The movement eventually succumbed to elite cooptation, legal disenfranchisement of its poor black *and* white supporters (initially through widespread violence and voter suppression), and the new positive class compromise of Jim Crow segregation (Cell 1985, p. 153). Popular movements predicated upon interracial solidarity became nearly impossible, as white workers were given a material, social, and psychological stake in the perpetuation of racial inequality. Subsequent radical movements in the South were largely denuded by their own dedication to the Jim Crow regime; for instance, the Socialist movement of the early 20th century (led at least partially by the former left-wing of the Populist Party) tried to “outnigger” the Democratic Party in an attempt to gain and retain supporters (Green 1980, p. 47; see, too, Foley 1997).

While the legal segregation of Jim Crow would be eliminated by the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, the third major regime of white supremacy, based primarily on de facto residential segregation—which ultimately determines other aspects of racial inequality like the quality of public schools, access to jobs, transportation, healthcare, etc.—was established in the 1930s by the New Deal. Often lauded by liberal commentators as the pinnacle of progressive politics in the US, the origins of the New Deal are grounded firmly in reactionary attempts to stem interracial working class militancy, partially through the safeguarding and expansion

of racial inequality. The extensive expansion of interracial unionism—made possible by Communist Party USA activism and leadership; first through their own unions, then through the CIO—as well as the growth of large interracial social movements—the CP-led Unemployment Councils would be the most consequential—led a decisive portion of the capitalist class to support the moderate reforms of the Roosevelt administration (Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin 2002; Goldfield forthcoming). Quite literally fearing revolution, New Deal Democrats, Progressive Republicans, and individual capitalists “thought government reforms were immediately necessary to avoid more radical demands and activity” (Goldfield 1989, p. 1275). These “reforms” took the shape of widespread working class concessions (e.g., Wagner Act, Social Security, etc.). However, the concessions applied almost exclusively to whites, as Congressional Southern Democrats would only acquiesce to New Deal legislation if it did not affect the basis of the Southern economy: a cheap and docile supply of non-white labor (Katznelson 2005; 2013).

Nevertheless, the racialization of New Deal policies like the Wagner Act or the Social Security Act are, at best, secondary factors in the current white supremacist regime. Much more consequential are the various federal mortgage policies, beginning with the establishment of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation in 1933, and the subsequent adoption of its racialized policies by the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom 2014, p. 104). These policies received widespread, bipartisan support—the Home Owners’ Loan Act of 1933, for instance, passed the House 383-4. This

decidedly contradicts Katznelson's (2013) claim that "no noteworthy lawmaking the New Deal accomplished could have passed without [the Southern Democrats'] consent" (p. 16).¹⁹ In any case, mortgage laws would not have affected the price or docility of the South's non-white workforce, so there was little incentive to break party rank and oppose them. As such, the mortgage laws were not subject to the limiting effect of the "southern cage," as Katznelson claims (*ibid.*). In other words, the Southern economy, and the Jim Crow regime that made it possible, were not responsible for the racialization of the HOLC, the FHA, or the VA.

In almost every account of the racialized operation of the New Deal mortgage policies it is alleged that the laws simply codified private market practice. Sharkey's (2013) account is typical: "the federal government *adopted a set of standards set by the real estate industry* to rank the riskiness of potential loans" (p. 59, *emphasis added*). However, as Kimble (2007) carefully demonstrates, the FHA "went far beyond merely acquiescing to racial discrimination" and "explicitly intended to isolate blacks in urban neighborhoods" (p. 400). Quoting Arnold Hirsch, Kimble concludes that "a conscious, deliberate choice for segregation lay at the heart of national policy" (p. 401). Indeed, northern segregation levels actually decreased during the 20-year period prior to the passage of the Home Owners' Loan Act (*ibid.* p. 422). From their inception, the federal mortgage policies created market

¹⁹ It should be noted that both Katznelson (2005) and Katznelson (2013) completely ignore the effects of the mortgage policies. Interestingly, the only mention of the FHA in Katznelson (2013) is a reference to his earlier (2005) work, stating that "missing from that book, however, was a discussion of how housing segregation was encouraged by the Federal Housing Administration" (p. 24).

incentives for whites to perpetuate residential segregation, not the other way around. Since homeownership for whites requiring financial assistance (i.e., loans/mortgages) was predicated on their neighborhoods maintaining a white-only residency, whites were given a major incentive to exclude non-whites, especially through the establishment of racially restrictive covenants (which were encouraged if not required by the FHA anyway) (ibid. 412). Subsequently, the FHA has “actively disguised its leadership in advancing a nationwide segregationist agenda by deflecting blame onto the private market for policies that it had standardized and mandated” (ibid. p. 400). Unfortunately, scholars of residential segregation have largely bought into this revision of history.

What is critically missing from accounts of residential racial segregation stemming from New Deal housing policies (i.e., virtually every account in the structural racism paradigm) is a contextualization of these policies within the larger goals and trends of the New Deal. The New Deal was an attempt to stave off interracial working class militancy through moderate concessions. The housing policies of the New Deal were part and parcel of that attempt. Crucially, these policies deliberately favored whites over non-whites, giving whites strong incentives to pursue their interests in racial, rather than class based terms. This is the basis for the current iteration of the positive class compromise of white supremacy.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have developed a model of positive class compromise that describes the perpetuation and evolution of white supremacy in the US. This model overcomes the methodological shortcomings of theories grounded in the structural racism paradigm, namely by locating the causal impetus of racial inequality in the capitalist state's attempt to mitigate working class militancy. The positive class compromise of white supremacy, while initiated at the behest of the capitalist class, provides strong incentives for both the white working class and the capitalist class to perpetuate its terms. In other words, the positive class compromise provides a "material basis" for both parties to perpetuate the white supremacist regime. Additionally, while remaining situated within the methodological bounds laid out by Bonilla-Silva (1997), the model avoids the pitfalls of other class-based theories of race by eschewing one-sided explanations: specifically the orthodox Marxist approaches that consider race a "superstructural" phenomenon that mystifies the working class from pursuing their material interests, and the "bottom-up" theories that ignore both the state and the capitalist class' role in establishing white supremacist regimes.

Largely unanalyzed in the above, though, is the role of individual employers in buttressing the socio-political regimes of white supremacy. While I have focused on largescale class-based social movements, and the legal regimes of white supremacy that work to liquidate them, individual employers have continuously used a similar logic to defeat unionization efforts. Though this tactic, characterized as

“race management” by Roediger & Esch (2014), makes little sense outside of the context of the causes and consequences of the legal regimes of white supremacy, it has served as a fundamental supplement to these regimes in a basically unaltered form since the racialization of slavery. Black strikebreaking, and the displacement of white workers with non-white workers as “strike insurance” continues to exacerbate racial antagonisms, while discouraging the interracial solidarity often necessary for worker organization (see Whatley 1993; Roediger 2010). The current widespread displacement of white workers with Hispanic workers, and the consequent rise of right-wing populism, can be usefully interpreted through this analytical lens, rather than through the denials and shibboleths of journalistic accounts (Berlet & Lyons 2000; Melcher & Goldfield forthcoming). Case studies in race management and their effect on unionization efforts and general racial attitudes are a much more fruitful avenue of research than the current, largely ahistorical study of structural racism (see, e.g., Esch 2018).

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ABSTRACT**WHITE SUPREMACY AS CLASS COMPROMISE: THE POVERTY OF
STRUCTURAL RACISM AS A THEORETICAL PARADIGM**

by

CODY R. MELCHER**August 2018****Advisor:** Dr. Michael Goldfield**Major:** Political Science**Degree:** Master of Arts

In this thesis, I develop a theoretical frame through which the perpetuation of racial inequality in the United States can be fruitfully interpreted. This reconceptualization is necessary, I argue, because the now dominant paradigm of so-called “structural racism” is methodologically untenable. I contend that the seminal theoretical and empirical accounts within the paradigm do not provide compelling or methodologically sound explanations for the perpetuation of racial inequality, often (and disturbingly) ignoring the historical record of race relations in the US. Specifically, I show that these accounts rely on the dubious causal mechanisms of structural inertia or ideological racism. Where these pitfalls are avoided or otherwise acknowledged, the paradigm is still insufficient in explaining the persistence of racial inequality because it either consciously or unconsciously avoids contextualizing the current regime of racial inequality within the larger historical role of race in American history. I attempt to remedy these issues by locating the causal impetus of racialized social structures in the class relations of

the US. I argue that, broadly speaking, workers pursue their interests collectively in one of two ways: through race and gender inclusive, class-based organizations, or through exclusionary race and gender-based organizations. To combat the possibility or reality of the former, employers and the state—separately and in conjunction—have historically incentivized and encouraged the latter to avoid potential shifts in the balance of class power. I model this relationship using what Erik Olin Wright (2000) has described as a “positive class compromise.” White supremacy, then, in its various iterations and guises, is one of the primary processes through which the inherently antagonistic class relations of American capitalism are hegemonized.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Cody R. Melcher was born on August 5, 1991 in Dearborn, Michigan. He completed his undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in 2013. He entered the graduate school of Wayne State University in the fall of 2014, graduating with a Master of Arts degree in the summer of 2018. From 2014-2017, Melcher was the instructor of record for undergraduate courses on political theory, urban politics, and American politics. From 2017 to the present, he has served as Prof. Michael Goldfield's research assistant as he works to complete a book on the actual and potential unionization of the US South during the early to mid 20th century. Melcher and Goldfield have also collaborated (Melcher appearing as the first author) on a number of journal articles, the first of which appeared in the *Journal of Labor and Society*. Two other articles are forthcoming. Independently, Melcher has published in the *Journal of Political Science Education*. He will be pursuing a Ph.D. in sociology from the Graduate Center, CUNY starting in the fall of 2018.

